

I BRUISE EASILY



Fall

Over the past decade or so, the German artist Gabriele Stellbaum, who lives and works in Berlin, has become known for severe narrative films and installations that often have a distinctly dystopian, Orwellian air. Stellbaum is director, cinematographer, script writer, editor and often the only actor in her films. Speaking in English with a slight German accent, she cuts a striking figure on the screen, with stylish bobbed hair and clothes that come from an earlier 20th-century era.

I BRUISE EASILY



Recently, Stellbaum's films have dramatized scenes from classic literary texts, such as Kafka's *The Castle* and Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. The films are short, perhaps 10-20 minutes in length. These narrative extracts focus on the anguish of waiting, the dreariness of institutional settings, and our impotence in the face of bureaucracy. Her works constitute a kind of poetry of exhausted affect. The camera pans the room, cuts, fades, repeats. Stellbaum's voice resonates as it loops and echoes as the story unfolds. For *Bartleby*, Stellbaum's video installation based on Melville's 1853 story, Stellbaum re-figures a gallery's main space into a film set, with drab brown walls and two desks with chairs. In the accompanying video projection, Stellbaum plays Bartleby as a female office worker, an insignificant clerk who nevertheless drives her employer to distraction by her calm but resolute refusal to comply.

The construction and conception of identity is a pivotal, reoccurring thematic throughout the body of Stellbaum's works, where her particular mise-en-scène locates the obtuse questions of identity within a complex of relationships: between societal structures, economy and the pursuit of individual existence.

The following interview was conducted in Berlin by Kathrin Becker, who runs n.b.k. Video-Forum.

KATHRIN BECKER runs the Video-Forum of the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.) in Berlin.

KATHRIN: The characters in your video works, who are often influenced by literary archetypes (Melville's character Bartleby, the Scrivener, for example), have all been transformed into female figures. Are you also reflecting gender identifications within your narrative (re)constructions?

GABRIELE: Absolutely. Most of the plays or stories I adapt for my work originally have male protagonists. The characters that I choose, however, are not imbued with expressly male affections throughout the narratives and can be easily transformed into female identities. I am revitalizing the stories of these characters for a contemporary environment while staging the solitude and loss of a middle-aged, confrontational female professional. My characters are secretly rebellious towards what is a repressive surrounding -- they unsettle it -- but they are unable to fully succeed in their quietly antagonistic mission. This is true today in Germany, where women have been pronounced equal to men, but where they still earn, on average, two-thirds the salary men receive, especially in the art field.

K: You have always played the female roles you have re-scripted from transformed literary characters and narrative paragons. It would be rather obvious and perhaps a cliché to ask to what extent your personal life experience influences your work, so I would like to turn the question around: How does your work influence your personality?

G: It is nearly impossible to play a character like Bartleby without adopting or becoming that personality. Undoubtedly, only a few people in this world would not be seduced by Bartleby's polite but insistent refusal of work. Every character that I play leaves a trace, an imprint, and becomes attached to my personality during the production process. I sometimes catch myself repeating certain gestures, movements and utterances of these characters in my everyday, off-screen life. It is like I'm carrying on the lineage of these newly transformed characters, even post-production. These characters are an extension of my person and are brought closer through the development of the visual and performative world of the character -- the visual translation is my way of thinking and reacting to these figures.

K: Does the *mise-en-scène* of your work follow a general structure -- or a basic, foundational one -- concerning, for example, the positioning of your isolated protagonists in relation to the proportions, depth and framing of your performative spaces?

G: I began as a sculptor before I came to the medium of video, so the positioning of figures in space are still persistent considerations, as if making an installation. I find architecture and design emotionally charged and I use them to convey anonymity, failure and oppressiveness of social or political systems. My protagonists are often lost, secluded or trapped in an impersonalized architectural environment. The focus of the frame, however, remains on the figure and the camera watches the protagonist from a distant perspective. I unconsciously use a mathematical system to portray and display proportions, figures, angles and temporality in a repeating esthetical configuration in my works.

K: These esthetic constants you mention make me think of the *décor* and interiors of your video works. The furnishings and costumes have a specifically „prudish“ feel to them, in my eyes, a prim and exceptional styling. How does this formal styling add to your videos?

G: I choose the furnishings and costumes in order to establish a design setting that can pass as generic, say from any time during the last 40 years or so, and that can still be recognized as contemporary in certain parts of the world. The set dressing and staging in my videos is purposely minimal and demure -- often beyond function. The real space of reference exists or is completed only in the imagination of the viewer. The minimal settings orient the focus of the viewer on the protagonist. Besides this, I use colors and patterns with sociopolitical meanings to evoke a certain memory of bureaucracy and institutional spaces, but also to play with the notion of our own biases of visual encoding.

K: Have you ever considered using your own original scripts, your own original material -- beyond literary archetypes -- for your work?

G: At the moment I am working on my own script for a new production -- I could not find an existing script that suited my idea. Titled „I bruise easily“, it takes place in different countries and involves five languages. The work deals with the political guilt of the individual within a global context -- the subject's own sensed culpability, which has yet to be widely addressed in a literary, cinematic or theatrical context.

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ESSAY

Hitchcock's 1966 Cold War thriller *Torn Curtain* features character actress Lila Kedrova in a cameo role as "Countess Kuchiska" an older impoverished Polish aristocrat who helps a US scientist and his fiancée to escape East Berlin. She recognizes the two fugitives by chance on a crowded street and they go to a coffee shop to negotiate an exchange: "You are safe with me, I am not communistical. Now I am making you a proposition. Will you help me please, I need American sponsor." --Kedrova plays the role of a small-time hustler to the hilt as she tearfully blackmails them, offering that she will get them to their escape point in return for their sponsorship for US citizenship.

HONEST LIES

This meeting catches much of the desperation and the powerless predicament of the ordinary citizen living under totalitarian rule, and also has some resonance with the film series by Gabriele Stellbaum "I Bruise Easily," where a woman attempts to negotiate her way around the all-seeing eye of the autocratic state.

Gabriele Stellbaum's latest work in this series is titled "Honest Lies." Her film begins with the sound of skidding brakes as a mother and daughter seated in a small car catapult to a halt. They are pulled up short. The film then cuts between a Renault-4 driving endlessly round a deserted German car park at night and the same woman who elegantly dressed in a headscarf and raincoat takes a ferry across a lake and walks into a forest in bright sunlight to furtively collect and drop packages of papers from an empty wire garbage basket (--"a hateful orange-brown folder" as the narrator spits).

Unsettling neo-noir incidental music and a clipped female off-screen voice-over add to the film's claustrophobic yet compelling circularity. The small car winds endlessly through the deserted garage as if searching for the right point of meeting amid its anonymous floors, and then finally at the end the screen finally fades slowly to black as the corridors continue.

Similar to a labyrinth, Stellbaum's filmic structure leads us down into a winding Dantean underworld of thoughts, memories, fears, and imaginations of what is yet to come. The narrative is driven by the cryptic, half-revealed mutterings of a mother ruminating over actions she has taken that may soon be regretted. As viewers we are brought along for the ride but kept in a state of suspense, awaiting clues and secrets to be revealed.

This much is clear: The mother is betraying secrets to protect herself and her daughter. We are unclear if she is betraying the government or her neighbors or both. She began with a small assignment. The "limits of that responsibility" have since been "expanded." The lies have become larger. She is now caught between moral imperative and personal expedience. As the narrator states, "I do have a certain instinct for self-preservation." - This line is perhaps the key to the whole film. There is both pride and self-excuse in this statement. The totalitarian state deliberately divides to conquer, coercing the populace into a state of retreat, so intent on survival that civic responsibility can be dismissed with the excuse of self-preservation.

In the East German state during Communism for example, according to reports, one in every six delighted in or benefited from or was blackmailed into informing the Stasi on the lives of their co-workers and neighbors. This situation creates a society spinning on lies, the fear of truths revealed, and the continual dread of betrayal.

In the post-Wall era, the binary model has changed, there is no longer the old school juxtaposition of the individual and the totalitarian state, this model has practically become retro chic itself. Looking back, this was a cleanly cut world of good vs. evil, and now it is gone for good. We have lost the luxury of the easily identifiable adversary. We find ourselves caught as participants in an all-encompassing system, which is neither good nor bad: the invisible hand reigning into our lives is just utterly amoral. And similar to Stellbaum's vast, empty concrete structure, there's many turns and many pointers and directions, but - as it seems - no exit. We're victims, perpetrators and also collaborators in a bureaucratic global system that has now run out of control.

Unlike Stellbaum's earlier solo works in this series, this new film now features three actors, the mother, her teenage daughter and a middle-aged anonymous-looking man (perhaps an undercover government official) who briefly joins the mother in her car in the night-time car park to hand her a folder. The man's manner is brusque, matter-of-fact, adamant that either she will take the folder or there will be repercussions.

Totalitarianism's game of control and surveillance relied of the complicity and understanding of both perpetrator and victim. Michel Foucault writes about the changes in societal policing brought by Bentham's 1791 prison model, the Panopticon, "the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any one moment." Foucault argues that everyone is aware of being watched, they are also self-policing, reducing the state's workload. This decentralized self-policing introduces suspicion of whole categories of society. Foucault notes "This architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating

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and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers." In the new totalitarian state, the inculcation of fear relies on circularity, there is no escape, it is a closed system.

Stellbaum's small Renault is lost in the hi- resolution stop- motion digital architecture of the huge desolate concrete car park at night. The normal daytime users have gone home and the night-time dissident is spotlighted in the neon lighting, trapped and hyper-aware of the one-way system in which she is ensnared, now endlessly implicated by the official and his hateful incriminating bureaucratic folders.

In other sequences inside the car, the woman's only companion is her teenage daughter who sits mutely in the backseat protected and under maternal control. The daughter is smiling, amused and uncomprehending as to why they are driving endlessly around a car park at night. She must never know her mother's secret or the danger they are in. She too is hostage -- to her mother's fears.

The inclusion of a mother-daughter relationship in this film adds another thread to Stellbaum's narrative beyond Stasi-era East Germany. The narrator states cryptically at one point, "Subversion of society is possible only for a mere few -- preferably those without children or anyone to love... In my architecture of lies it will have been better to avoid close friendships or contacts." Stellbaum here alludes to a different state of exception: the terrorist. Spies live undercover and their families generally remain anonymous, but the known terrorist's family members are vulnerable to attack. In a war of no-negotiation, the collateral damage can be extensive. Post-war German history attests to the vulnerability of the children of the terrorist Baader-Meinhof members when the group became fugitives. The dissident mother must always struggle between personal and ideological concerns.

In such a setting, like Hitchcock's *Countess Kuchiska*, Stellbaum's protagonist catches the viewer in a heart-rending bind. In a nighttime car park, a woman driver is caught without any means of escape. She needs help, her hands may be dirty from the things she has done, and the stories she is telling us are puzzling and incomplete. Are they truth or lies? The viewer becomes caught up in her escalating dilemma, and starts spinning round with her on a roundabout with no exit.





I am not communistical. Now I am making you a proposition. Will you help me please? I need American sponsor.

"How far will the limits of responsibility be expanded?

Each time somebody will have been asking me this question
I will have gone blank.

At some point I will have been unable to turn my fears into
concealed words any longer. Time will tell. It always will.

Why, in spite of all things, will I not have been able to recognize
the smile of my traitor that particular day in late September?

He will have been handing me another one of these hateful
orange-brown folders. And this time I will be strong enough
to turn him away – will I?

That same night I will have been forced of leaving my daugh-
ter behind for her own safety without telling her anything.

I will have finally understood that I will have failed to match
my actions to my commitments – subversion of society is
possible only for a mere few – preferably some without children
or anyone to love."



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ESSAY

In a metamorphic, Sisyphean series of video works, Berlin-based artist Gabriele Stellbaum excavates threads of an imagined personal history which speak to the awkward contingencies of private lives in contemporary politics. This series of films is titled “I Bruise Easily.” In “Honest Lies” and “Future Memories” two earlier films in the series, the settings seem elusive. Stellbaum is filmed on a train, walking through a forest, or driving round an empty car park, going on clandestine appointments, carrying a typewriter or delivering a mysterious manila envelope. The films conjure up a world that might or might not have a connection to random totalitarian systems, places where past betrayals always come home to spoil everything.

SUMMER'S FROST

Both these films feature Stellbaum playing the role of a worker, a cryptic cypher dressed stylishly but demurely, always in a somewhat subaltern role, meekly completing her task, submissively contrite to an invisible (but ever-present) authoritarian order. She seems partially rebellious, often contrarian, frequently uncooperative, but always aware of a larger central ordering logic she cannot avoid. Escape seems futile.

In her new video work „Summer's Frost“ Stellbaum plays Miss Brodsky, a woman in her forties who is shown in a hospital, bandaged, sectioned, possibly arrested, under doctor's surveillance, incapable of escape or release. She appears to be a worker who transgressed. She has been caught. Brodsky is cantankerous with doctors and nurses, drugged, half-lucid, half-catatonic. Imprisoned against her will, she will make her warders suffer. Her acts may have been political, terroristic, but she is being kept in a state psychiatric ward. The ordeals of imprisoned 1970s West German terrorist Ulrike Meinhof come to mind.

“Summer's Frost” is constructed in a series of short, mysterious scenes which fit together to form a sort of jigsaw. The film opens with a shot of snow falling against

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a background of fir trees while unsettling avant-garde incidental music cues the audience that this video is working with the audio tropes of intrigue, danger, and the awkward resolutions of the psychodrama genre. These aural flurries instill suspense like Hitchcock and Bernard Hermann's macabre and suggestive incidental motifs.

Stellbaum's film cuts to a female doctor in her office on the telephone, speaking in Spanish discussing an "activist" with a colleague. The scene suggests international espionage and/ or governmental betrayal. As Brodsky enters the room, the doctor suddenly switches from Spanish to English and changes her tone to one of subtle interrogation.

This opening sequence alerts us to many clues in the film. Brodsky is a former worker who has betrayed her employer or the state and she is now an unwilling interviewee. She is less helpful to the doctor than she had been in earlier meetings. Brodsky is now defiant, questioning the state, the interview itself, the surveillance she feels she is under.

In a later dream-like sequence, Brodsky is filmed alone in a snowy landscape at the edge of a forest, with an expansive snow-covered clearing before her. She takes off her winter coat and shoes and leaves them in a neat pile. She is wearing only a slip. She then walks underdressed and barefoot across the snowy plain. The shot runs for two long minutes. This long footage is filmed in real time as Stellbaum's icy-footed figure recedes to the point of invisibility. There is no clear explanation for this strange walk. Perhaps it is a dream sequence. Perhaps emblematic of a internal voyage this character has made out of normal human behavior, -her retreat seems a journey away from rationality and into loss of identity within the context of her medical confinement.

In a final sequence, Brodsky is surrounded by her medical captors on a hospital bed. She seems familiar with at least one of her captors. She suddenly screams at a bespectacled bald older hospital warder „It's you, you traitor!“ The exact connection between these two characters is never made clear but the sense of sweeping paranoia is intense. -Is she delusional or is she revealing a wide-reaching conspiracy? "Summer's Frost" leaves its viewers in a similar state of ambivalence. Brodsky plays on this contemporary role, the dissident as whistleblower, as prisoner of conscience.

Stellbaum's video series explores the interface of dominant narratives and personal agency amid contemporary cultural contexts. For her the personal is always political and the political always in reflection finds its dirty work inflicted amid personal narratives of struggle, survival and awkward contradiction. Stellbaum's characters "bruise easily" because they live in a violent political present.



“Summer’s Frost” - Hospital Scenes 1- 3

Dr. Kundrou (Ashiq)

Prof. Malakoff (Otto)

Dr. Sanders (Diani)

Nurse Garber (Helia)

Szene 1

The automatic doors open and Prof. Malakoff enters the hospital hallway with his entourage, Dr. Sanders, Nurse Garber, Dr. Kundrou

Dr. Sanders

carrying a clip board with papers

“Her name is Elena Brodsky, age 50, one daughter who left the country in the age of 12. No other relatives. Had been committed to state institutions twice in the old days before the downfall.”

Prof. Malakoff stops abruptly and turns to Dr. Sanders. Nurse Garber bumps into Prof. Malakoff.

Prof. Malakoff:

“Do we know where?”

Dr. Sanders:

Dr. Sanders looks at him skeptically and fumbles with her glasses.

“These records are obviously lost. She was admitted yesterday and has been under my observation since. Shows strong signs of burn-out and

depression, not cooperative at all. Has been accused of mail tempering, highly bizarre and psychotic actions. We are supposed to find out if she is involved with an activist group. No medication yet. I believe there is more to the story than it appears....

Scene 2

Malakoff enters room with his entourage.

Mrs. Brodsky sits on the bed and does not react.

Dr. Sanders (with a soft voice):

“Hello Mrs. Brodsky.”

Mrs. Brodsky turns around slowly. Her eyes widen in surprise starring at Prof. Malakoff. She jumps of the bed and faces Prof. Malakoff furiously.

Mrs. Brodsky appalled:

“You?”

Malakoff looks irritated, wrinkles eye brows and flinches.

Mrs. Brodsky:

“Traitor!” --- “You are going to pay for that!”

Prof. Malakoff backs off (dismissively):

“Mrs. Brodsky - I do not recall that we ever met. I think you are taking me for somebody else.”





Dr.Sanders:

“Let me have a quick look at your chart.”

(Reads and smiles winningly.....)

“You were admitted to our unit yesterday evening. Do you want to talk about what happened?”

Mrs. Broadsky sits stiff in her chair expressing resistance and remains silent.

Long pause. The psychologist sighs.

“Look Mrs. Broadsky, we really could make this a bit easier for both of us.

Looking at your chart,- well, you have been reported as delinquent. However , your violations are of ----- such a bizarre nature, that the decision was made to have you admitted to our hospital.”

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BLUE MOON

The expression “Once in a blue moon” refers to an event that almost never happens. The scientific term “Blue Moon” is used to describe to a rare occurrence in the lunar calendar when two full moons appear in the same month.

Gabriele Stellbaum’s film “Blue Moon” begins with the view of an autumn tree which is seen through an open kitchen window on an upper-floor apartment. Small birds flit here and there outside. Inside the kitchen, in front of the window, a woman sits at a table with a cup of tea. She appears withdrawn and occupied by her thoughts. The sudden ringing of a telephone off-camera interrupts her solitude but she doesn’t react to the call.

Next the film cuts to an outdoor shot of leaves tumbling onto an old, deserted, slow-moving children’s playground roundabout. As the roundabout slowly spins round, we listen to an answerphone message left for a “Mrs. Griffin.”

In the following scene we see the woman, perhaps Mrs. Griffin, dressed in a winter coat walking along a path in a mysterious forest in autumn. She is carrying a strange-looking black bag over her shoulder and she seems to be headed on a mission. She stops at a bench, unpacks the bag and starts to assemble a leaf-blower. She starts up the machine and begins cleaning the forest path she is walking along.

She blows all the fallen leaves along the forest path. She appears intent in her task of clearing the path of all its leaves. The leaves are shown blowing in slow-motion and also in reverse. Her act appears absurdist in its physical impossibility.

In the final sequence of the film, the camera cuts to inside the top deck of a double-decker bus, where we observe Mrs Griffin sitting in the front seat, riding home through the forest in the late afternoon light.

“Blue Moon” is a short poetic film. It features few words. It has a strong musical component, and its atmosphere builds in a series of intriguing, complex and increasingly dreamlike sequences.





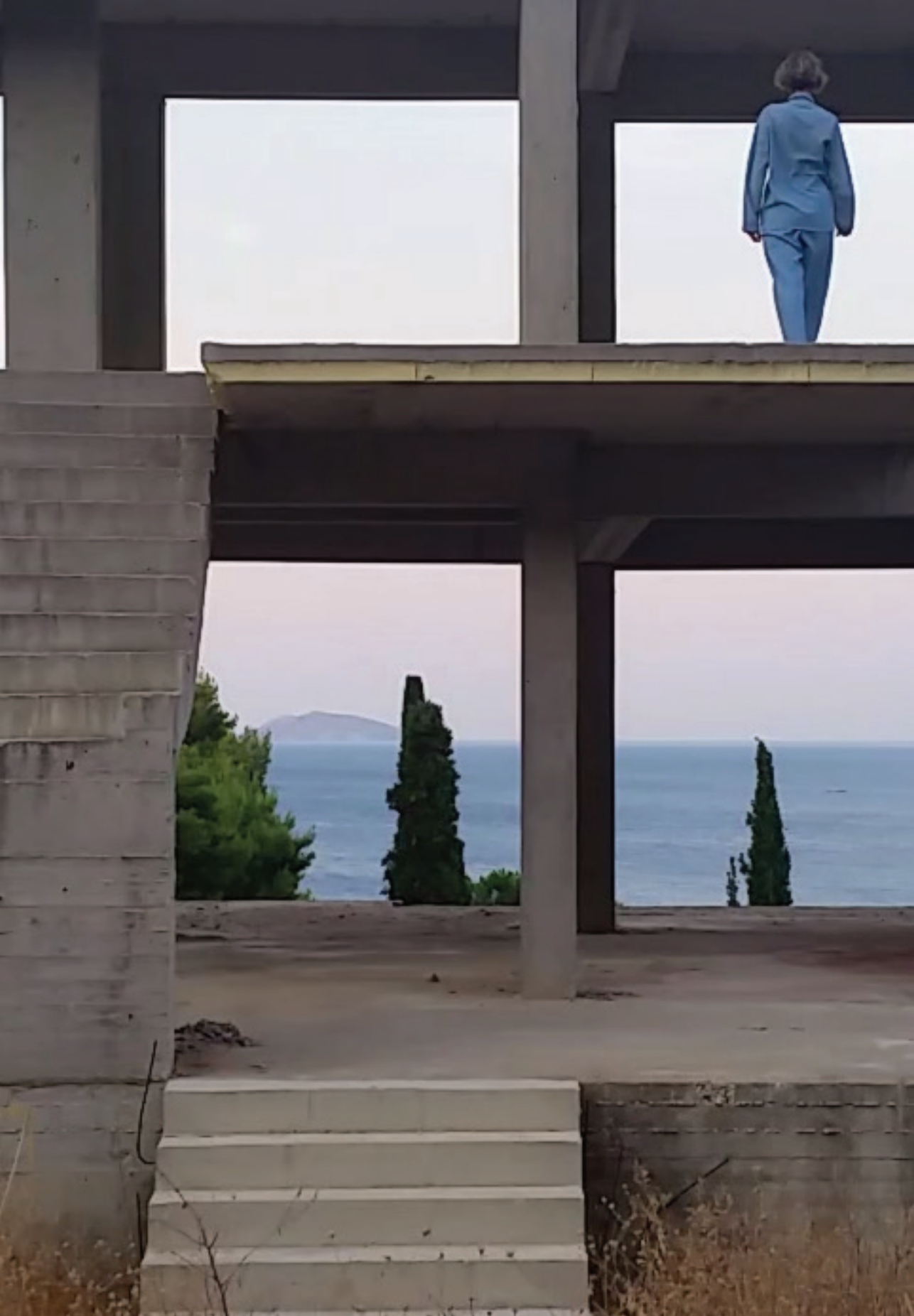
I BRUISE EASILY



“Hello Mrs. Griffin - This is Tom from B&Q. I’m sorry to hear the news about your husband. Just to let you know, the product your husband ordered has arrived. When would you like to have it delivered?”







Gabriele Stellbaum
FILMOGRAPHY

Blue Moon, 2015

The Flight of a Humming Bird, 2014

Ill-timed Moments, 2013

Summer's Frost, 2013

Honest Lies, 2011

Future Memories, 2010

Bartleby, 2009

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